



STATE OF WASHINGTON
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News Release

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Board of Health to hear testimony on environmental justice

June 13, 1–9 p.m., Eagle's Aerie #1, 6205 Corson Avenue South, Seattle

OLYMPIA – Minority and low-income communities in Washington are more likely to live near environmental hazards—contaminated sites, hazardous waste facilities, major sources of air and water pollution, landfills, incinerators, and facilities listed on the federal toxic release inventory (TRI) database. Low-income people and people of color also suffer disproportionately from a wide variety of diseases, some of which may be linked to environmental causes.

All of this suggests that state and local agencies in Washington need to pay closer attention to the environmental justice movement and its concerns, according to a proposed report from the Washington State Board of Health.

At its June 13 meeting in the Georgetown neighborhood of Seattle, the board will consider findings and recommendations contained in a new report from the its Subcommittee on Environmental Justice. It will also hear from researchers, community activists, and representatives of federal, state, and local government agencies working on environmental justice issues.

“Despite our best efforts, the health concerns of low-income and minority communities sometimes don’t get enough attention when people are deciding where to site industrial facilities and how to regulate environmental hazards,” said Board Member Carl Osaki, who served on the subcommittee.

“Some important work has been done nationally on addressing environmental justice issues,” said the other subcommittee member, Board Member Joe Finkbonner. “The board wanted to take a look at the degree to which environmental justice problems exist in Washington state, and see if there were ways that state and local governments could do to a better job of addressing them.”

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Environmental Justice concerns that came to the subcommittee's attention and are described in its report include: exposure to pesticides for farm workers, exposure to toxins in fish for members of various racial and ethnic minority groups, and exposure to urban pollution sources for residents of urban industrial areas.

Both the Georgetown neighborhood in which the Board is meeting and neighboring South Park are mixed-use, low-income, and highly diverse neighborhoods with numerous industrial sites that pose potential hazards. Both neighborhoods have been the source of community activism around environmental justice issues. The Lower Duwamish River, which divides the neighborhoods, has been proposed for the National Priorities List, an Environmental Protection Agency listing of the nation's most serious hazardous waste sites targeted for cleanup.

The proposed report recommends that agencies adopt a set of 11 guidelines designed to ensure the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people in the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental health and public health laws, regulations, policies and research activities. It also recommends ways to improve coordination between agencies and to increase the cultural competency of agency staff and their awareness of environmental health and environmental justice issues.

As part of its work, the subcommittee has created a Web site on environmental issues. It can be found at <http://www.doh.wa.gov/sboh/ej>.

Copies of the agenda, the executive summary of the report, and related materials are available by contacting the Board of Health or by visiting the board's Web site at <http://www.doh.wa.gov/sboh/>.

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<p>The State Board of Health is composed of 10 members appointed by the Governor to represent the people of the State. The Board's mission is to develop policies to promote, protect, maintain, and improve the health of Washingtonians. Visit the Board's website at www.doh.wa.gov/sboh.</p>
